

A small world

by Take-bamboo

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Summary: It's a small world. A one-shot. On a normal day, the Shinsengumi learnt something more about their reticent and reserve 3rd unit captain, Saito Hajime

A small world

It was a normal day for the Shinsengumi. Saito Haijime, the third captain of the Shinsengumi unit was on patrol with the other Shinsengumi on duty. They were rounding the corner of the Kyoto street. He glanced at the street houses along the path, keeping a look out at any disturbance casued by the lawless ronnin. Kyoto was safer and quieter when the Captain, Kondo Isami formed the Shinsengumi group. Well, for the civilians at least. The assassination of the Tokugawa shogunate's officials were still at large.

The scent of hakubaikou intruded his nose and thoughts. It was a long time since he smelt the scent of the white plum. He looked around in search of the source of the scent. He did not remember coming across any plum trees in Kyoto and it was not the flower blossoming season yet. His eyes widened a fraction when he spotted a young lady dressed in a white kimono with a purple shaft. Her hair was tied neatly into a low ponytail unlike most women with sophisticated hairstyle. Yet, what puzzled him most was her face, for he recognized it almost instantly.

"Tomoe kun?" he said with a curt nod as he turned around to face her.

"Hajime san, it has been a long time," answered Tomoe with a polite bow. Whether she was excited or shocked to see him, he could not tell for she kept a stoic face.

"Hajime san? Ne, Saito san, I didn't know you are so close to a woman," said Okita who stood beside Saito when he realised he was not

following the group.

"Is she your woman?" asked Harada Sanosuke.

"Cease your guessing. Yukishiro Tomoe is a respectable friend of mine from Edo," said Saito as he narrowed his eyes at his companions.

"Edo? Really, I am Okita Soji from the Shieikan fencing school in Edo. Nice to meet you," said Okita as he introduced himself.

"I am Harada Sanosuke. Are you a samurai?" said Harada as he inspected her closely.

"Yes," Tomoe answered softly. "Nice to meet you."

"Our family are gokenin and we are childhood friends," Saito added.

"Why would a beautiful lady wander in Kyoto on her own?"

"It is impolite to intrude one's privacy." Saito chided, noting that Tomoe had frowned at the question. She was uncomfortable with strangers and dislike being questioned.

"The Shinsengumi pledged to protect order in Kyoto. We will protect you from the disorder, Tomoe san," exclaimed Harada.

"I am fine," answered Tomoe.

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The Shinsengumi finished their patrol and they settled down in a nearby stall for tea.

"The man called you Saito," said Tomoe as she placed her hand around the tea cup. She had known him as Yamaguchi Hajime when they were young. Saito's father, Yamaguchi Yusuke and Tomoe's father, are both of gokenin, a low ranking retainer directly serving the Tokugawa shogun.

"I changed my surname to Saito when I was on the run," answered Saito shortly. Two years ago, he left Edo after accidentally killing a hatamoto at Koishikawa Sekiguchi in Edo.

"I see. I never thought you would be joining the Shinsengumi. Yamaguchi sama said you would be in the Yoshida dojo as an assistant instructor. However, when I went to the dojo, Yoshida sensei said you left."

"I quitted after two months. I am indebt with the Captain of the Shinsengumi and I decided to join the group."

"You would not be punished if the man who challenged you was not a hatamoto."

"He is not the only reason I am on the run."

Tomoe kept silent for she knew well what he meant. The hatamoto was not the only man Saito had killed. "Still, I am glad to see familiar

face in Kyoto. The culture here is so different from Edo."

"It takes time to adjust." Saito said, not least surprise that she was not repulsed by him. Tomoe was not an ordinary lady one meet on the street, she was born a samurai from Edo. Death and killing were not abstract ideas to her. She had seen much more.

"By the way, Hiroaki sama was appointed as a treasurer in the household and Katsu sama gave birth to boy last year."

"So I heard. Thank you for telling me all this." His brother, Yamaguchi Hiroaki was very good at mathematics and his sister Katsu was married to a chief doctor of the Mito clan.

"Is Yukishiro sama in Kyoto?" asked Saito for he could not think of any special reason why she would be in Kyoto.

"No, I came alone."

Saito raised an eyebrow but said nothing. He is not one to bother about people's business. Everyone has things they did not want to share. If she did not want to tell him, he would not ask. He began to eat the side dish he ordered.

"It is really interesting," commented Okita who sat at another table with Harada. They were surprised to find someone, especially a lady, who knew their reticent and "woman-hating" third unit captain well.

"You are right. Saito san seems to be having a good conversation with the Tomoe san."

"They seem to be close," said Okita, remembering that the lady, known as Yukishiro Tomoe, called their third unit captain by his last name.

"He hardly speaks in the headquarters," said Harada chewing on a toothpick.

"Whatever he says are so abstract and philosophical. I prefer hanging out with you, Harada san."

Tomoe turned to watch the petal of the sakura flower flew gently with the breeze. It was a long while before she spoke, "Among flowers, the cherry blossom; Among men, the samurai."

"The way of warrior is death, a samurai should always should always be prepared for death - whether his own or someone else's," answered Saito as he too turned his head to look at the cherry blossom.

"I come to Kyoto to look for Kiyosato Akira."

"Akira san? The second son of the Kiyosato sama?" commented Saito as he remembered his childhood friend.

"Hn. He died while on service for the Mimawarigumi as a bodyguard of the Kyoto Administrator," Tomoe said calmly.

The Mimawarigumi? The fact that Akira worked for the Bakumatsu's special police force who were competing with the Shinsengumi threw

him off guard. Akira was a hardworking student but he was not skillful enough. Though Saito had little interaction with him, Akira was still a clan member in Edo and the news of his death made him boil with rage inwardly. He would seek revenge for him.

"Where do you stay?" enquired Saito.

"At an inn, which is occupied by the Choshu clan."

"That is too dangerous," said Saito, his voice betrayed his shock and anxiousness. The Choshu clan was anti-Bakufu and slighted the emperor. She was living in the lion's den.

"Do not worry about me, I can handle myself," she replied calmly as usual. It seemed nothing ever worries her. Yet, women were not suppose to be involved in politics.

Saito sighed quietly. There was nothing he could do except to protect the city. He could not take her to the headquarter. It was as dangerous as putting her with the Choshu clan. All he could say was, "Please take care of yourself."

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